



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

AUGUSTUS THOMAS ON HIS METHODS

BY PROFESSOR BRANDER MATTHEWS

WALTER BAGEHOT once asserted that the explanation of the inadequacy of the average book was to be found in the two facts: that those who write books rarely know anything but books, and that those who really know men and things, rarely know how to write. We may perhaps go farther and suggest that the man who has done important things is not often moved to write about them; he is content with the doing and he feels no call to undertake also the writing about what he has done. But when such a man is tempted to take his pen in hand to talk about the interesting events in which he has been a chief figure, and when he chances to possess the gift of making others see what he has seen, then we get books of a delightful flavor and savor, like the autobiographies of Benvenuto Cellini, Benjamin Franklin, Joseph Jefferson, and the "Personal Memoirs" of Grant.

There are a few books of this sort written by practitioners of the several arts. These are not many, because the artist is often a little inarticulate and more than a little unconscious of his processes. He is likely to work by instinct, by intuition, by native gift, rather than by any set of rules which he could formulate for the benefit of others. Criticism of any art demands a certain flexibility of the intelligence which the artist often lacks. Indeed the artist does not need intelligence as a chief qualification; and many artists of high distinction have not been conspicuous for their mental powers. Dickens, for example, and even Victor Hugo will never demand consideration as leaders of thought. The famous preface to "Cromwell" may have its importance as the manifesto of the Romanticist revolt in France nearly a century ago, but its statements are untrustworthy and its theories are untenable. All the more valuable, therefore, if only for their rarity, are the writings of the artists who have succeeded in their calling because of their intuition and native gift and who also are endowed with intelligence and the critical faculty and an understanding of the art of writing!

The artist as well as the layman is under a debt to Reynolds and Fromentin and La Farge for their discussions of their own craft of painting, and to Stevenson and Henry James and Howells for their several analyses of the principles and the practise of the craft of novel writing. Even the prefaces that Alphonse Daudet wrote for his stories, anecdotal as they are and not technical, are full of useful information for the inquirer who seeks to understand the art of fiction. Suggestions of value can be gleaned from Stevenson's account of the inception and development of "Treasure Island," and even Poe's fanciful narration of the successive steps taken by him in the composition of "The Raven" has a utility of its own, in spite of our inability to disentangle the exact amount of fact which it contains.

The technique of play-making is at once firmer and more delicate than the technique of novel-writing; it is distinctly more difficult to acquire and more precarious to apply; and consequently

discussions of the methods of the drama by professional dramatists are even more to be desired than discussions of the methods of the novel by professional novelists. Unfortunately they are far fewer. The story-teller is permitted to talk about his characters and is thus encouraged to talk about himself, whereas the playwright is of necessity impersonal, letting his characters speak for themselves. Yet now and again a dramatist has found occasion to analyze the laws of his own art. Lopé de Vega did it in his "New Art of Writing Plays"; Molière did it in his "Critique of the School for Wives"; Ernest Legouvé did it in his lecture on his collaborator Scribe; Bronson Howard did it in his "Autobiography of a Play" and Sir Arthur Pinero did it in his illuminating lecture on Stevenson's unsuccessful attempts at playwriting. The late Jules Lemaitre, dramatic critic as well as dramatic author, has left an account of the succeeding steps taken by him when he was invited to compose a comedy for Coquelin.

But until now no prominent playwright has ever published a group of his pieces prefixing to each of them a frank and full account of the way that particular play came into being. This is what Mr. Augustus Thomas has done in a uniform series of six of his successive pieces now issued in French's "Standard Library Edition." These six plays are "The Witching Hour," "The Earl of Pawtucket," "The Other Girl," "Oliver Goldsmith," "Mrs. Leffingwell's Boots" and "In Mizzoura." It is greatly to be hoped that Mr. Thomas may be encouraged to include another half-dozen of his plays, not omitting "Alabama" and "Arizona." What he has here chosen to do was well worth doing, and he has done it very well indeed. The six plays serve to reveal Mr. Thomas's versatility, his ability to deal with subjects of various types, imposing upon him a corresponding variety of treatment.

Mr. Thomas seems to think that his prefaces are of interest and of utility chiefly to novices in playwriting; and it may be that the message is intended more particularly for them. But there is a message for the dramatic critic as well as for the dramatic author. These two messages can best be considered one after the other, beginning with that for the 'prentice playwright. What the 'prentice playwright will discover as he considers the structure of these plays is that they are all of them examples of expert technique. Whatever their other merits—as pictures of American life, as portrayals of American characters—their technical merits are obvious and indisputable. Mr. Thomas has mastered his craft; he is familiar with all the tricks of the trade (taking this phrase in its best sense); he is an adept in construction, in exposition, in contrast, in suspense and in climax. His farces "The Earl of Pawtucket" and "Mrs. Leffingwell's Boots" are as solidly and as conscientiously built up as his loftier drama "The Witching Hour." Each of the plays has a sufficient story, artfully articulated into a compelling plot, rousing the interest of the spectators at the start and sustaining and even intensifying that interest to the finish.

These six prefaces inform us as to the exact

point of departure from which the several plays took their start. In them the craftsman takes us into his workshop and lets us see the successive stages of the slow evolution of his story. He is transparently clear in his narrative and he is immitigably honest in his self-revelation. He tells us why and how his play sprang to life, even if he can not explain the essential quality which finally bestowed life upon it. Genius was once defined by Edison as consisting of inspiration and of perspiration. Inspiration must always remain more or less of a mystery, while it is both possible and profitable to analyze the mechanical effort which was responsible for the perspiration. Especially interesting is Mr. Thomas's constant confession that at a certain moment in the evolution of his plot his imagination was aided by the results of his own earlier observation whereby he was able to utilize personal experiences of his own as well as his memory of things done by others.

Perhaps there is no necessity to dwell further on the suggestiveness of Mr. Thomas's prefaces for the novices in playwriting. These novices need only to be told that a highly competent craftsman has here analyzed his processes; and they will promptly make their profit out of what Mr. Thomas had done for their benefit. It may be well however to emphasize the significance of these prefaces for the dramatic critic no less than for the dramatic author. The critic of any art is prone to regard the finished work of art, poem or play or painting as the expression of the emotion of the artist at the moment of its creation. He is a little inclined to ignore the conditions under which the artist has had to express this emotion. No artist, for example, was ever more individual than Michelangelo and none ever expressed himself more forcibly. But none the less his "David" is what it is because it was wrought from a marble block of unusual shape; and his "Last Judgment"

is what it is because it was conceived specifically to decorate the walls of the Sistine Chapel. In each case Michelangelo expressed himself completely, but in each case again in accord with conditions he could not control.

The conditions under which a dramatist has to work are as inexorable as those which Michelangelo faced; and like his, they are stimulating rather than restrictive. They are the result of the fact that the playwright intends to have his piece produced in a theatre, by actors, to move a succession of audiences; and these conditions are not stumbling-blocks in the path of self-expression—they are stepping-stones.

Three of these six plays were devised to fit the personalities of three different actors; and very instructive indeed is Mr. Thomas's account of the manner in which the personalities of these comedians served to stimulate the inventiveness of the author. What the American playwright did in making these American plays to fit certain American actors is exactly what the dramatists of other countries and of other times have been in the habit of doing—each of them profiting by the specific gifts of the tragedians and comedians of whose services he could avail himself. As Mr. Thomas composed "In Mizzoura" for Nat. Goodwin, so Rostand composed "Cyrano de Bergerac" for Coquelin, and so Sardou composed "La Tosca" for Sarah Bernhardt. So also Molière composed the "Misanthrope" for his wife and for himself; and so also Shakespere composed "Hamlet" and "Othello" for Burbage. It is greatly to be regretted that Shakespere and Molière did not leave us an analysis of their processes in writing their masterpieces as veracious as the unpretentious and modest introductions that Mr. Thomas has now prefixed to his half-dozen unpretending and modest plays—none the less worthy of high esteem because of his modesty.

Brander Matthews

THE ST. LAWRENCE

Great River, still as any frozen sea,
I saw thee mid thy moonlit isles at rest
And then I thought I saw thee at thy best—
Inconstant stream! With springs unsealed and free,

In consciousness of thy sublimity
I next beheld thee opening up thy breast
And throbbing forth thy soul with maddened zest,
The far-off sound of ocean's calling thee.

As at that voice, thy spirit sought its goal
To mingle thy deep waters with its own,
Forsaking beauteous isles for fate unknown:

So may my course, like thine, not turn aside,
May love and aspiration be my guide
Throughout that great apocalypse of soul!

Martha B. Mosher